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AUTHOR Covert, Douglas C.
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ABSTRACT

A content analysis of selected print media examined press coverage of the shuttle Challenger explosion. Press sources identifying and explaining technological causes were tabulated for two major newspapers, three popular newsmagazines, and one trade magazine, during the 30 days following the event. Results revealed (1) a failure to provide timely and accurate information because the press did not depart from customary sources; (2) a variation in collective behavior theory in that the media stopped seeking effective keynote speakers when regular sources failed; and (3) an apparent refusal of these media to publish incorrect or implausible information. (Eighteen notes and three tables of data are included.) (Author/RS)

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by

Douglas C. Covert

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Assistant Professor
Department of Communication
University of Evansville
1800 Lincoln Ave.
Evansville, IN 47722

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ABSTRACT

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Press coverage of the shuttle Challenger explosion was examined in two newspapers, three newsmagazines and one trade magazine. Press sources identifying and explaining technological causes were tabulated. Analysis demonstrated: failure to provide timely and accurate information because the press did not depart from customary sources, variation in collective behavior theory in that the media stopped seeking effective keynote speakers when regular sources failed and apparent refusal of these media to publish incorrect or implausible information.

A FAILURE OF SOURCE LISTS

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An established stable of sources is especially useful to reporters in covering a fast-breaking news event. When the event also involves the complexities of science and technology, a reliable source list is critical. However, this system of reliance on regular sources may also contribute to delay, distortion or concealment of the facts of a dramatic news story. And, "rounding up all the usual suspects" to provide information fails when the usual news sources clam up.

News coverage of the explosion of the space shuttle Challenger, STS Mission 51-L, is an example of this common but infrequently acknowledged phenomenon within the institutions of journalism. It points to a weakness in the collective behavior of media organizations that reduces their ability to serve the audience. When the usual sources fail, there may be others, obvious but perceived as less satisfactory and therefore ignored.

Content analysis of selected print media covering the Challenger explosion demonstrates flaws in the process of relying exclusively on a stable of keynoters instead of

expanding to other, easily available sources of information.

The analysis also supports, contrary to former assumptions, the proposition within collective behavior theory that, once established, there is a strong tendency for the media to cling to well-placed keynoters, even when they offer no explanation or information.

With these weaknesses, coverage of the event also reveals an underlying ethical strength in that incorrect information was not published despite its early prevalence.

NEWS SOURCES, KEYNOTING AND COLLECTIVE BEHAVIOR

Stempel and Culbertson noted in 1984 that "Rarely, if ever, do content analyses deal with who the sources of news are"(1). In the years since, there have been some analyses of sources, primarily in political reporting, and Wulfmeyer has treated anonymous attribution as used in Time and Newsweek (2).

There has been considerable discussion in the arena of science and technology about scientists as sources (3) and Mazur's "visible scientists" who "are creations of the media community" (4). Other than in nuclear power questions, little has been done to identify specific media sources used in covering a technological event of national importance and potential controversy gone awry.

Most reporters work hard to keep their source lists current. In any topic area, this list usually includes one or two "high-level" and thus preferred sources, several mid-level sources used to more fully inform the reporter and, lastly, a set of "fall-back" sources. These latter are rarely used, most often because the editors do not respect use of that source or the source does not have sufficient status. (5)

These sources, especially high-level or "official" sources, become the media-selected opinion leaders on the topic. In the terminology of collective behavior, these people would be "keynoters."

In the study of collective behavior, a keynoter is commonly self-selected then endorsed by the media rather than initially media-selected. Nonetheless, as in the study of news sources, a keynoter is that person who is accessible and articulate, usually personable, appears to be especially knowledgeable or whose credentials are impressive, often with appearance appropriate to the topic, and whom the audience (and editor) is likely to regard with respect. It helps if the keynoter also can be counted on for good quotes or sound bites. The keynoter serves as the principal spokesperson on an issue.

This use of keynoters should not be confused with Crouse's pack journalism where everyone shares the same sources (6), although there are similarities.

The mass audience, then, is dependent on the source elevated by the medium to the status of keynoter for information on an issue or event. If the keynoter is confused or deficient in information, the mass audience will also be confused or ignorant and flounder about seeking a keynoter who can answer their questions. Ineffective keynoters thus prevent audience understanding.

When Turner and Killian wrote about keynoting and keynoters, they were referring principally to crowd response (7). A leader, perhaps self-selected, "advances suggestions that help to resolve the feelings of ambivalence experienced by many crowd members" (8). Turner and Killian go on to describe how the mass media and the crowd interact in seeking "an explanation [of the event] and an object of antagonism":

> The newspapers offered a succession of objects to the diffuse crowd. But reflecting and responding to the crowd pattern themselves, the writers continued to offer new keynotes until those most acceptable to the diffuse crowd were found. Thus the tentative process through which the crowd defined the object of its pre-existing mood consisted of keynote, response, and modified keynote between the mass media and the crowd. (9)

Early work by Quarantelli and Hundley during the 1960s pointed to the effects of the media in promoting crowd action and that news reports of an event scheduled to happen were a precipitating factor in crowd response (10). With technological events, however, the crowd actions are generally confined to the media crowd with attitudinal rather than behavioral responses in the audience crowd.

Both the mass audience crowd and the media crowd sought a simplified explanation of the Challenger explosion and an object of antagonism.

> Drabek and Quarantelli have found, for example, that following a disaster that involves a complex set of causes . . . the public tends to symbolize the responsibility by blaming the occurrence on the dereliction of duty of a few public officials. The individual official constitutes an accessible symbol. (11)

Disasters also lend themselves to generation of a mystical symbolism and "invest the object of the crowd action with an aura of infamy, or tragedy, or of nobility" (12). The Challenger explosion certainly generated the auras of tragedy and nobility.

The Challenger event was prominent in the national attention and concern, yet the keynote sources did not have

the explanatory information either of the two crowds, press or public, wanted. The media kept slogging along in their accustomed way.

Analysis of timing when major print media reported, discussed and attributed specific technological causes of the Challenger explosion emphasizes problems in relying solely on a cadre of customary or high status sources to the exclusion of other possibilities.

METHODOLOGY

Keynote sources used by selected print publications in covering the Challenger explosion were tabulated as they received attribution in five news media, the New York Times, the Washington Post, Time, Newsweek and U.S. News and World Report during the first 30 days following the event, 29 January through 28 February. (13)

These five publications were chosen as representative media available to millions nationwide, well-staffed and well-edited, not dependent on wire or syndicate material and the most likely to be perceived by the mass audience as highly credible. While other newspapers might well have been chosen instead of the Post, it reports most intimately on and to those in government and industry directly involved in the shuttle business.

For comparison and reference in timeliness and accuracy of reporting, Aviation Week and Space Technology was chosen

as the authoritative trade press magazine, widely distributed by subscription around the world and with a long history and large sections devoted to space program topics.

Sources were identified as specifically as possible, then, as interrelationships became evident, the sources were collapsed into five major categories: 1) government and government-associated agencies or people; 2) people associated with involved industries; 3) engineers or technical experts from academic institutions, assumed to be reasonably but not certainly unbiased; 4) other media; and 5) the Presidential Commission on the Space Shuttle Challenger Accident, more commonly known as the Rogers Commission.

By the end of the second week after the event, most information as to technological and systemic causes of the accident came directly or indirectly from activities of the Rogers Commission, sworn in on 6 February, day 9 of the coverage. Therefore, tabulations and percentages were separated to identify those sources used prior to convening the commission or outside of the revelations from commission meetings. Also, coverage of the mourning and of the salvage operations were excluded.

Identifying and applying timing factors to an analysis such as this can be slippery. Early editions of a newspaper covering breaking news may not have the same information as later editions. Cover dates of news magazines are deceptive,

the demands of newsstand sales and distribution constraints encouraging predating issues by a week.

For consistency and to help avoid confusion in comparisons, analyses used the printed date on the microfilm editions of the Times and the Post, and the Monday following closing for all four of the magazines.

Two items were used as key markers in identifying timing of information: 1) mention of possible failure of O-ring seals in the lower field joint of the solid rocket booster (SRB) and 2) mention that tilting of the right SRB into the external main fuel tank for the space shuttle main engine (SSME) may have caused the destructive explosion.

FINDINGS

Attributions through Day 9

Attributions were tabulated for the first 30 days, but the nine days prior to information coming out of the Rogers Commission were considered most indicative and were tallied separately. Results for the nine-day period show the Washington Post using the greatest number and variety of sources (Table 1).

Table 1 about here

Washington Post and New York Times

First day coverage in the Washington Post spread over seven open pages and another half-page, as well as the front page, and there was continuous coverage throughout the month. A total of 68 attributed sources were used, 59 percent government-associated, industry 21 percent, academics 13 percent and other media 7 percent.

On Day 1, 29 February, The New York Times used its staff writers, editors and contributing writers to fill nine open pages and the front page.

It is difficult to identify all sources in "Special to the New York Times" reports. Many of the writers had several years in which to accumulate information and incorporate it into their own fund of knowledge. Where attribution was given, and until reports came out of the Rogers Commission, government-associated sources were acknowledged as 78 percent of the total sources. Sources from industry were used for 13 percent and academics for 9 percent. Coverage continued daily throughout the 30-day collection period.

Newsmagazines

To be fair to the weekly newsmagazine business, their deadline for attributions was extended two days to accommodate closing their second issues after the event (Table 2). Newsweek and U.S. News increased their sources, but Time didn't change.

Table 2 about here

Time. All five of Time's attributed sources were government-associated.

Newsweek. Ten of 17 Newsweek sources were government-associated, and the others were evenly scattered.

U.S. News. In spite of nearly doubling its attributions, U.S. News still used nine of 11 government-associated sources.

Aviation Week and Space Technology

It would be patently unrealistic to compare the sources used by AW&ST with the other publications. As a respected "member" of the space industry, many of its sources would be unavailable to the others. Furthermore, the reporters have been so intimately involved with the space technology program and business for so long, they have become their own sources, adding only new developments--and attributions--as those new developments arise. There is that information which, within the industry and the audience, has become "common knowledge" and does not ordinarily demand attribution with each reprinting.

Information in Aviation Week came from engineers, scientists and technicians, principally within industry, but

some in NASA as well as its own in-house experts.

Aviation Week was first to offer the O-ring seals, as one might expect (Table 3). In spite of a 10 p.m. Thursday closing following the Tuesday event, AW&ST was able to run 10 pages of text plus color photos and artwork, a 14-page total, and still make its regular close. The other publications were at least a week behind in identifying the O-ring seals.

Table 3 about here

Identification of the tilting of the SRB took another week or more, AW&ST closing with the information four days ahead of the Times and the Post. Time delayed mentioning the SRB tilting yet another week and Newsweek two weeks, three weeks after the event.

DISCUSSION

Reports following the Challenger disaster of 28 January 1986 received ample time and space, the coverage was fast and for the most part even, but the mainstream media were tardy in their search for explanations. The press persisted in seeking out speakers who did not have, or would not give, the keynote explanations. Part of the reason for tardiness was that mainstream media overlooked or ignored an important keynote speaker--another print medium, more forthcoming,

accurate and timely--a member of the business press.

Information available in the first hours and days after the Challenger explosion was often incorrect and space program sources were not particularly forthcoming. It was several days before the press recovered from inaccurate information and reluctant sources (14).

The New York Times and the Washington Post served their constituencies with thorough and continuous coverage. As the month wore on, there was less news and more summary in similar column inches. Some days saw reiteration, no news.

Not expected was the difference in sources cited by these two newspapers. In the first nine days, more than three-fourths of the Times' attributed sources were government-associated, whereas the Post used as sources only 59 percent from government. Excluding other-media contributions, the Post relied on government for 63 percent of its sourcings.

The Times first referred to the O-rings as a potential problem on day 10 from an academic source, then again on day 12, but only as one of several possibilities. On day 14 the Times quoted extensively from AW&ST and noted the tilting of the SRB into the main tank. The Post first referred to AW&ST as a source on day 13 with the O-rings and tilting SRB, and frequently referred to AW&ST reports thereafter.

Although closing two days later than Aviation Week, Time and Newsweek were a week behind in their coverage of

the technological causes of the accident. U.S. News was two weeks behind. All three finally caught up by the fourth week, with most information coming out of the Rogers Commission hearings.

The newsmagazines appeared to be conservative--or source-deficient--in their early reporting, perhaps waiting for a second and official source for confirmation and acceptable citation of what they considered unattributable information. U.S. News' reference in its fourth issue to official reluctance to talk in the first days following the event reinforced the impression of efforts within the space program to maintain official secrecy and the media's reluctance to go with information not officially confirmed or sanctioned.

Donald E. Fink of Aviation Week confirmed that NASA and other agencies were reluctant sources in those first few days after the event. Therefore, "within the second week," AW&ST was making available to other media, on Friday after its closing and before Time and Newsweek closings, "early advisories" on its content of the next issue (15). He also reported that the wire services readily gave credit to AW&ST. Time and Newsweek began to credit Aviation week in their third issues (day 20), a week after the content of AW&ST's second issue was made available to all media, while the Post and Times credited the trade magazine the third and fourth days after release (days 13 and 14).

ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSIONS

Early coverage of a technological disaster may be hindered by the inherent nature of the event. Human tragedy will magnify the event's public importance and dominate much of the reporting. But, the loss of life also urges immediate revelation of causes.

As a part of ordinary routine, news organizations identify and call on a series of established sources, articulate and accessible, for current and accurate information, especially when covering complicated or arcane subjects. The practice is supported by its assurance of necessary accuracy and credibility. Reporters then serve as a bridge between reliable sources and the mass audiences through their news reports.

Content analysis of coverage of the technological causes of the shuttle Challenger explosion by major print media and the sources used by these media demonstrates that confining sources to a clique of keynoters may in fact delay and conceal facts. Furthermore, some obvious sources may be overlooked or ignored by this practice resulting in prolonging the failure to serve the mass audience.

Flaws in the Reporting Process

In covering the Challenger event, the media sought out keynoters with some formal status and most acceptable to the media crowd, while they continued reporting to the mass audience crowd the various keynotes offered by these elite sources. However, early keynoters tended to give the same uninformative responses. Antagonism was broadly distributed, to NASA and to industry, but to no "object" or agent and, fortunately, no specific individual.

In the Challenger coverage, flaws were uncovered not only in NASA's processes but in the media's reporting process. Reporters had locked themselves into a system of exclusive sources.

Keynote sources in government agencies and congress were the first to receive attribution from the mainstream press examined here. Aside from Aviation Week, only the Washington Post reported information from an important number of sources outside of government or its agencies. Time magazine used only government sources during the first nine days, its first two issues, and the New York Times relied on government agencies for more than three-fourths of its information.

The first soundly based and well-developed explanations came from the trade press and provided the mainstream press with a ready source of detailed and accurate information, subsequently confirmed by the Rogers Commission report (16).

The mainstream press was behind--with the trade press information in hand--apparently waiting for official government-source confirmation before going to print.

There is a tendency to regard the trade press as a public relations vehicle for the industry on which it reports. Yet, if business press publications are to fully serve their customary readers and their represented industry, they must also be as timely, thorough and accurate as other media, if not more so. AW&ST fulfilled that function.

Continued successes generated an attitude of confidence at Aviation Week as they did at other media, and none but engineers expected such disaster from a cold launch. However, when the Challenger explosion occurred, the trade press performed the monitoring function of the press far better than mainstream newspapers and magazines. Its sources were patently superior to other media, as one might expect from its role as the industry's communication medium. But, it freely shared its information when the reluctance of officials to communicate became evident.

Time called Aviation Week "pro-NASA" (17), but Newsweek was the most protective of NASA, even in its fourth issue after the event when there was much evidence that the "flawed" process was principally in NASA. AW&ST, on the other hand, was willing and timely in pointing the finger of blame at both industry and government, directly and

accurately.

Early, thorough examinations, explanations and reports by Aviation Week, and sharing of that information with other media, helped open up the Rogers Commission hearings more quickly and encouraged others to come forward, as noted in the hearing reports. Information came to light more quickly than was expected from following normal investigatory channels. Timely and explicit reporting made it almost impossible for either industry or government to engage in cover-up maneuvers or shift the blame to scapegoats.

A less spectacular or public event, however, might not have received the same intensity of investigation, appointment of such an elite commission, nor subsequent revelation of flaws in products and especially procedures without the continuing pressure of the press.

The mass audience sought explanation. Without Aviation Week, they could have had a Brutus instead of a Mark Antony reporting the causes of the tragedy.

A Variation in Collective Behavior Theory

Traditional studies in collective behavior indicate that there is a dynamic process that goes on between the mass audience, the media and the potential self-selected or media-selected keynote speakers, continuing until keynotes acceptable to the audience are found.

Normal crowds keep looking for the keynoter, the principal spokesperson for an event. The media crowd is also expected to continue seeking informed spokespeople. The crowd needs explanation from a keynoter to understand complex situations. The common practice by reporters of relying on an established list of sources, acceptable because of their status, and not looking elsewhere, may limit the effectiveness of the media in covering technological or scientific events.

In covering the Challenger disaster, the media kept returning to sources, especially in government and government agencies, who were accessible but who had no knowledge to add. The same influential congressmen were interviewed and cited frequently, even when they were uninformative.

Perhaps the mainstream press had run through their source lists, including their low-status fall-back lists. Persistence in returning to the same sources, and ignoring AW&ST, suggests that the reporters, and their editors, were unable or unwilling to innovate.

> But it is [the media's] task to seek out, insofar as they are able, genuinely expert sources. This may mean going beyond those sources which are most immediately visible, such as directors and administrators of prominent government and private agencies, or a few

"celebrity" sages who are presumed to know something about practically everything. (18)

Having created its keynoters on the topic of the Challenger explosion, reporters seemed unable to switch to other sources, even when their experts and selected opinion leaders offered no information. They persisted in clinging to a vocal yet unfruitful cadre of keynote speakers.

Demand for Accuracy

Continuing success in the space program had dimmed the eyes of the watchdogs in their reporting on the shuttle program. Attempts by the mainstream press at reporting immediate causes of the explosion were thwarted by a need for accuracy and a lack of open sources. Demands for instant explanations before facts were known or revealed gave rise to much speculation, although only the most plausible reached print.

Because fault would be assigned, knowledgeable sources were reluctant to speak, even as facts became obvious; professional friendships between the press and personnel of various agencies, in government and industry, became adversarial.

When the mass audience becomes emotionally involved in disastrous events, simplified explanations and symbolization may be demanded. However, the audience may also be served by

delay in the case of technological events which have no ready or easily understood explanations. Postponement in identifying a human object of antagonism until the real "culprits" were known was responsible behavior. Erroneous information was not printed.

Mourning the loss of the astronauts and their celebrated passenger allowed the media to divert public attention temporarily from the demand for information, explanation and interpretation. This diversion allowed time for the media to seek additional sources and for thorough investigation by officials of government and industry so that detailed and accurate information could become available.

SUMMARY

Analysis of the space shuttle Challenger disaster coverage by major print media indicates weaknesses in the process of selecting and using sources, a variation in the expectations suggested by collective behavior theory and an ethical strength in the dissemination of news about a nationally prominent tragedy.

Well-maintained source lists are prized and carefully guarded assets of reporters. Mass audiences, as well as reporters, are dependent on these respected, articulate and knowledgeable sources, especially in dealing with technological and scientific issues. When the source list

fails to provide needed information, however, a major breakdown in the reporting system can occur. The media studied here appeared to be unable or unwilling to depart from their customary procedures and examine other possible sources to fulfill obligations to the audience.

Theories of collective behavior suggest a dynamic process in seeking out keynote speakers. There is evidence that there are limits to this dynamism when the media cover large-scale technological events. Failure of the usual sources to provide explanation and interpretation understandable by the mass audience seemed to immobilize the media in their search for keynoters. The customary spokespeople failed, but the media did not turn to another source of information, accurate, timely, readily available and forthcoming with its services.

Although they failed to provide information demanded by their publics, the major print media studied here did not print incorrect information or implausible speculation. While the public demanded explanation, the major media demanded accuracy.

In view of these findings, it would be appropriate for the major print media to re-examine their attitudes toward sources, including the business press, while not abandoning their demands for openness and accuracy.

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12. Ibid.

13. Data collected by Rick Callahan, Kim Melton, David Overton and the author during the period 25 September through 8 October 1986.

14. Telephone interview with Donald E. Fink, Editor-in-Chief, Aviation Week and Space Technology, 10 November 1986.

15. Fink, ibid.

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Table 1

Attributions through Day 9

	NY Times		Post		Time		Newsweek		U.S.News	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
Government	25	78	40	59	5	100	6	60	5	83
Industry	4	13	14	21	0	0	1	10	0	0
Academics	3	9	9	13	0	0	2	20	1	17
Other Media	0	0	5	7	0	0	1	10	0	0
Total	32		68		5		10		6	

Table 2

Attributions through Day 9 or the Second Issue

	NY Times		Post		Time		Newsweek		U.S.News	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
Government	25	78	40	59	5	100	10	59	9	82
Industry	4	13	14	21	0	0	2	12	0	0
Academics	3	9	9	13	0	0	3	17	2	18
Other Media	0	0	5	7	0	0	2	12	0	0
Total	32		68		5		17		11	

Table 3

Number of Days into the Story

	O-rings	Tilting
Aviation Week*	6	13
New York Times	10	14
Washington Post	13	13
Time**	13	20
Newsweek**	13	27
U.S. News**	20	--

*Closed days 2, 9, 16 and 23.

**Closed days 4, 11, 18 and 25.